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SUBJECT: HAMAS PURSUES THREE-FOLD STRATEGY IN GAZA

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Classified By: A/PO Greg Marchese for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C/NF) Summary. In separate meetings August 27, UNRWA Director for Gaza John Ging and Gaza-based Associated Press reporter Ibrahim Barzak characterized Hamas' agenda in Gaza as three-fold: (1) imposing gradual social and cultural change in accordance with Islamic values; (2) seeking international recognition and legitimacy; and (3) consolidating economic and security control. Ging suggested that Hamas is willing to delay progress on social change while it focuses international recognition and maintaining security control. He also said that UNRWA can provide a viable and popular alternative to Hamas, particularly in education and economic growth, with proper support and access to materials and cash. End Summary.

Hamas' Social and Cultural Agenda

¶2. (C/NF) In separate meetings on August 27, two Gaza-based observers provided overlapping descriptions of Hamas, governance strategy. Since taking power in 2007, Hamas has continued its gradual campaign to impose Islamic values on Gazan society, Ging said. However, Hamas leaders have stopped short of overt enforcement of Islamic values (such as decrees) in an attempt to portray themselves as a "moderate" alternative to Salafist groups. More subtle methods are employed, he noted, such as "religious police" questioning unchaperoned couples and women wearing "inappropriate" attire. Both contacts noted that Hamas leaders did not officially decree that high school girls must wear the jilbab and hijab, but promoted the practice at the grassroots level.

So far, the results were measurable, Ging said. Seventy percent of Gazan women now wear the hijab, he claimed, compared with only 30 percent in the 1980s.

¶3. (C/NF) Both Ging and Barzak felt that the closure of Gaza is furthering Hamas' social agenda. Barzak pointed out that civil society groups are particularly vulnerable to Hamas pressure, now that they are cut off from foreign visitors and denied the ability to leave Gaza. Similarly, media organizations must now rely on stories written from outside Gaza or by local correspondents who may be subject to Hamas pressure. Ging said "a new kind of extremism" centered around religion has emerged in Gaza. The trend is reversible, he noted, but the longer the current situation prevails, the more difficult it becomes to reverse it.

Seeking International Recognition

¶4. (C/NF) Our contacts said a second pillar of Hamas' strategy is to seek international recognition and legitimacy.

According to Ging, Hamas leaders claim that Israel's international reputation was badly damaged during the recent Gaza conflict for the cost of "only 1,300 Palestinian lives." Following the conflict, Hamas leaders have adopted a policy of unilateral restraint while assessing USG efforts, he added. Some leaders claim that they are implementing one of the three Quartet principles (nonviolence) by preventing rocket attacks against Israeli targets. Ging said another element of Hamas, strategy is to facilitate international VIP visitors, even for those who refuse to meet with Hamas. The status quo will not last forever, Ging predicted, as Hamas faces pressures from "hotheads" within its own ranks.

Consolidating Control Inside Gaza

¶15. (C/NF) According to Ging, Hamas has full control of security in Gaza. Hamas' organizational structure is flat, with close connections between leaders and the grassroots. Loyalty within Hamas remains strong, he added. This loyalty was recently demonstrated when Hamas operatives in Rafah, upon instruction from Hamas leadership, moved against the Salafist group Jund Ansar Allah (reftel), despite the fact that some former Hamas executive force members had joined the group. Hamas, one potential Achilles Heel, according to Ging, is the growing perception of its disproportionate use of force against other Palestinians.

¶16. (C/NF) On the economic front, according to Barzak, Hamas is able to pay salaries in full and on time, and never appears to face budget shortfalls. Key sources of income include charities, taxation, and foreign support, he said.

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Some examples include transaction fees in the telecommunications and media sectors, mandatory car registration fees, and a Hamas-controlled firm's monopoly in the car insurance sector. Ging characterized the tunnels as "a fully operational underground commercial crossing," including palletization and a fuel depot. "Some tunnels are large enough to drive a car through," he said. Barzak said Hamas also generates income from its investments in agricultural greenhouses, palm trees, fish ponds, and real estate. Investments in real estate are significant enough to have increased property values in Gaza, he claimed.

Efforts to Marginalize Hamas

¶17. (C/NF) Ging said that UNRWA social programs run counter to Hamas' Islamist agenda. He described key UNRWA initiatives, such as secular summer camps for 250,000 Gazan children, women's radio networks, and an initiative to teach junior high students about various human rights movements, including the U.S. civil rights movement and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. Ging noted that UNRWA has implemented all of these programs with the consent and support of the Palestinian refugee community, including UNRWA's 10,000 Palestinian staff in Gaza. "People berate Gazans for not fighting back (against Hamas), but the fact is that they do -- through programs such as ours," he said, adding that Hamas and other Islamist groups in Gaza frequently and publicly criticize UNRWA for these programs.

¶18. (C/NF) Ging said he worries that Gazans' willingness to support these programs will wane if UNRWA is unable to deliver essential services and relief. "It's basic politics," he said, adding, "if we deliver, then we'll have popular support." Ging noted that Hamas could "throw us out" at any time, but for now the group's leaders have "bigger issues" to deal with, such as gaining international recognition and legitimacy.

¶19. (C/NF) Ging said education is the key to stemming Hamas' influence in Gaza. He noted that UNRWA has enrolled 8,000 more students in its Gaza schools compared with last year.

However, GOI restrictions on the import of construction materials continue to prevent UNRWA from repairing damaged schools, or from building new classrooms to accommodate increased enrollment. By contrast, Ging noted, Hamas can bring in whatever construction materials it needs to rebuild bunkers or other infrastructure through the tunnels. He added that, while Hamas has plenty of cash, UNRWA is having difficulty in obtaining the cash it needs for social welfare payments, and for families to replace windows damaged in the conflict as winter approaches.

¶10. (C/NF) Ging noted that Hamas does not have the means to undertake large-scale reconstruction in Gaza. This is an area where the international community, through implementation of UN construction projects, could claim credit and counteract Hamas' economic control, he said.

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